

Mad Mel

He's been voted the sexiest man alive, but in reality Mel Gibson has six kids and a happy marriage. **Martyn Clayden** investigates the lethal charm of the actor who's very big down under - and everywhere else as well!

Americans voted him, "The Sexiest Man Alive." He's topped other polls as "The Man I Would Most Like To Shower With," and "The Sexiest Bottom in Hollywood," as well as "The Man Most Women Fantasise About When They're Making Love To Their Husbands."

No, it's not Fred Flintstone but the Hunk from *Down Under*, Mel Gibson, currently wiggling that delightful derriere for the third time in the latest installment in the *Lethal Weapon* series. But despite the accolades, Mel is a firmly committed family man (including 6 kids and a devoted wife, Robyn, to whom he's been married for 12 years) who finds the adulation of his female fans often disturbing:

"I've been grabbed by women in all sorts of places - and one where it really hurts. One of the most terrifying experiences of my life was the premiere of *Mad Max 2* in Australia. I was horribly trapped by 500 screaming women and felt petrified. They looked like they were going to tear me to pieces".

For a man who's still essentially modest, shy, and retiring, his current heady success must seem a million miles away from when he was a struggling, broke actor in Sydney. He was actually born to Catholics of Irish descent in Peekskill, New York State, the sixth of 11 children. His mother was a former opera singer, his father Red Gibson (because of his hair rather than his politics!) a railway brakeman.

His parents emigrated to Oz when young Mel was just 12, a decision made at least in part by Red's fear that some of his children might end up in Vietnam. His strict Catholic school taught him self-reliance ("some were regular sons-of-bitches and others were wonderful men"), and when he left he tried his hand at a couple of menial jobs before enrolling at the National Institute of

Dramatic Art.

In his second year, he made his inauspicious screen debut as a surfer in a low-budget rock-'n-roll movie *Summer City* (1976). He was the shy, quiet one in a group of four fun-loving youngsters, and he received the princely sum of \$20.

The future was looking decidedly grim until Mel went to an audition for

had a magnetic screen personality, and it was well used in this high-octane gang-warfare thriller that became Australia's biggest box-office hit, as well as spawning two sequels.

As George Miller commented: "He has screen presence and a wide range of abilities, but more than that seems to be deeply obsessed with the craft of acting".

But instead of immediately capitalising on his new-found fame, Mel decided to hone his skills in the theatre, joining the State Theatre Company of South Australia to perform in classics like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Waiting For Godot*.

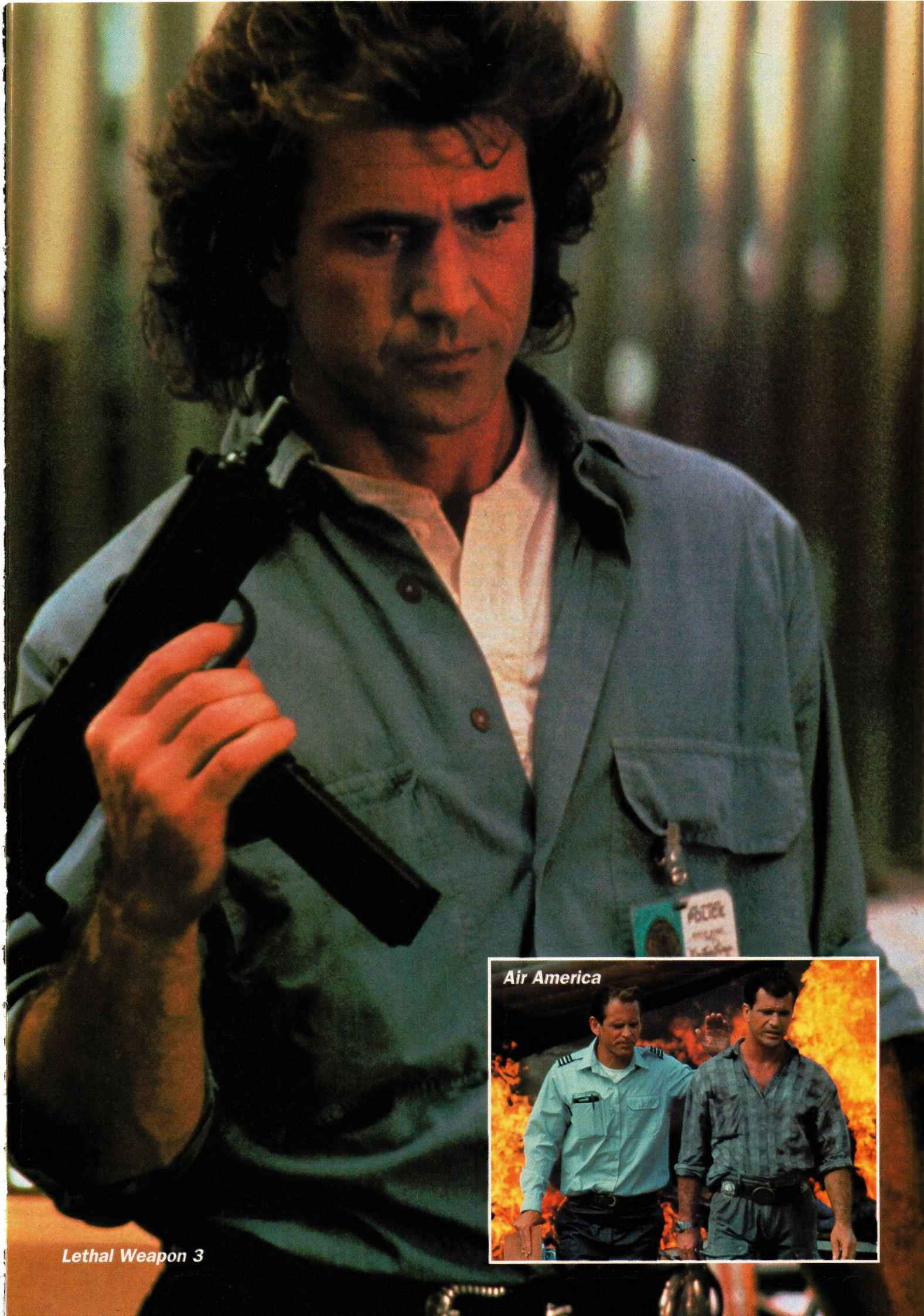
Then, instead of aiming for another obvious commercial film he chose *Tim* (1979) a sensitive study of a mentally subnormal handyman who falls in love with a woman (Piper Laurie) twice his age. He was rewarded with the Australian Film Institute's Best Actor Award - the equivalent of an Oz Oscar.

He added another one with his stirring portrayal of a fun-loving young man who enlists to fight in the Great War in *Gallipoli* (1981), which underlined the sheer horror and waste of the conflict. Having obviously caught war fever, he agreed to star in a humdrum Second World War adventure, *Attack Force Z* (1982), in which he was part of an elite commando group despatched to rescue some mates who'd crash-landed behind Japanese lines. The film was far too downbeat for most audiences, and nowadays he grimaces at the memory of it: "It serves to remind me, when I'm showered with scripts, that I can be bad too".

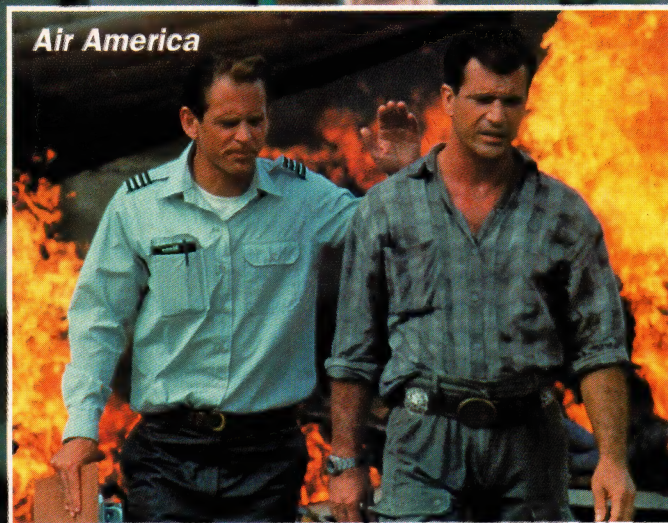
So, having learnt a painful lesson, he returned to his roots to make *Mad Max 2: Road Warrior* (1982). Rather caustically described in the 'quality' film press as "essentially just another display of vehicles smashing into each other", the sequel was more like a Clint Eastwood 'Man With No Name' spaghetti Western, with Our Hero



fledgling director George Miller, who was making a low-budget futuristic movie about a vengeful cop in black leather. He arrived with a bruised face following a pub brawl and instantly landed the role of *Mad Max* (1979). For someone so young, he



Lethal Weapon 3



Air America

Lethal Weapon 2



helping the defenders of an oil-refinery against the marauding biker hordes. Like Clint he stayed long enough to see the job done before heading out into the wilderness, throwing out the odd one-liner as he disappeared.

With a bigger budget than the first episode, and a good distribution deal, Mel thus came to the attention of a vast American audience, who recognised him as a natural successor to the strong loners like Paul Newman, Gary Cooper, and Clint. As a result, MGM put up half the money for his next collaboration with Peter Weir, *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983). Mel played Guy Hamilton, a tough but naive journalist sent to cover the Communist agitation in Indonesia in 1965, and the character was strong enough so he had the chance to again escape from 'comic book' labelling.

Sigourney Weaver also starred, as Mel's love interest. But although their scenes hint at why he was later to get mobbed by women at premieres, the principal interest of the film was his complex relationship with the diminutive cameraman Billy (Linda Hunt) who acts as both his eyes and ears for each story. An intelligent and thought-provoking movie, it again underscored the range of his considerable talents.

But with every winner comes a clinker, and the Dino de Laurentiis epic *The Bounty* (1984) was just that. The oft-told tale of the infamous mutiny now boasted a distinguished cast in the shape of Anthony Hopkins as the mutinied-against Captain William Bligh, Mel as chief mutineer Fletcher Christian, Laurence Olivier as Admiral Hood, with support from Edward Fox and Daniel Day-Lewis. Maybe it was all those Tahitian beauties, but the saga simply wilted away

as it progressed, leaving one critic lamenting it was "a long voyage to nowhere".

Fortunately, Mel's sails were set on more favourable winds, as he finally was accepted on California's beaches. Hollywood snapped him up for a rural drama, *The River* (1984), where he and Sissy Spacek battled to save their farm from floods. Old-fashioned and worthy, it still earned Spacek an Oscar nomination and Mel a healthy shot of kudos.

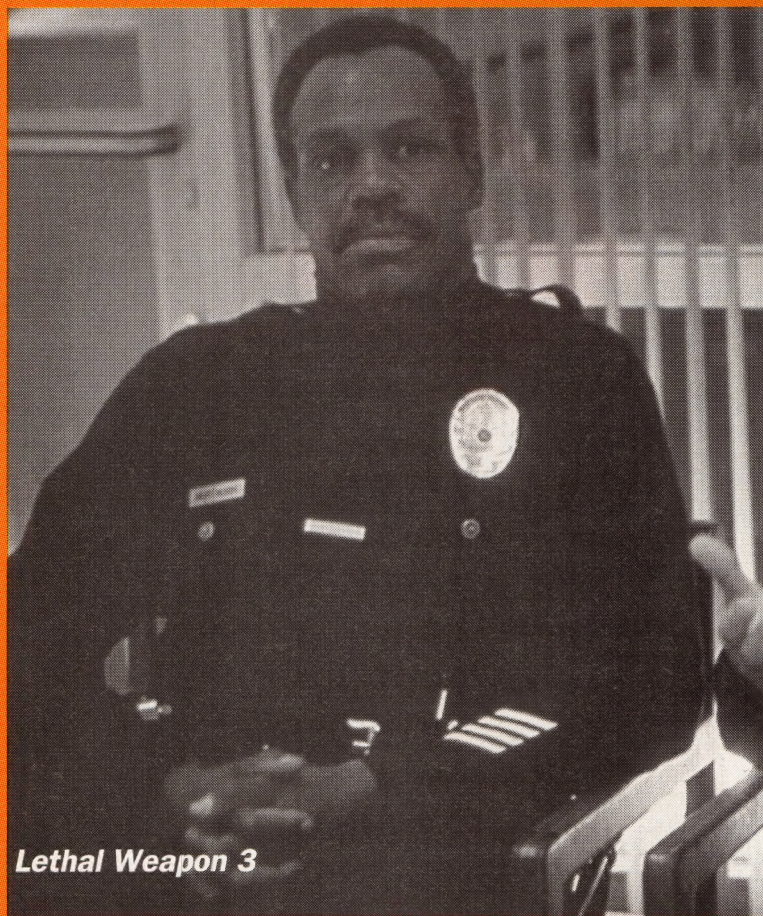
Fortunately he brought a harder edge to *Mrs Soffel* (1984), where his burgeoning ladykiller image was highlighted as a prisoner who seduces a warden's wife (Diane Keaton) into aiding his escape. The lacklustre script and leaden pacing did him no favours, though, and so he returned for the third time to George Miller as *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985).

By this time, terminal sequilitis was already far advanced. The raw edges had been rubbed off the Road Warrior, and his battle against Tina Turner's Auntie Entity had nothing like the ferocity generated by *Parts One and Two*. The Thunderdome gladiatorial combat was impressive enough, but the chase and

shoot-up scenes at the end seemed tired and clichéd, and the emphasis on the feral kids looked like an unscheduled intrusion from Peter Pan. Still, it brought in the bucks and put Mel back in headlights.

The penny had finally dropped that his appeal came from a mixture of strong, assertive independence, on-the-edge danger, and ironic humour. The day it all came together was when the script of *Lethal Weapon* landed on his mat. Here was a strung-out cop, so devastated by the death of his wife that he's permanently flirting with suicide. Martin Riggs is thus a danger to himself, his colleagues, and especially to the bad guys for whom his death-wish is the worst possible news.

The trick was to partner him with a much older, more stable family man, Roger Murtagh (Danny Glover) who's hoping to coast serenely towards his retirement. Both men secretly admire the other while outwardly fighting to be apart, and it's this tension and interplay between the characters, backed up by healthy



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doses of action and violence that ensured its success. The drugs scam being run by Gary Busey is secondary to the relationship between the two cops.

So good was the 'chemistry' between them that after experimenting with another so-so thriller,

Tequila Sunrise (1988), in which Mel's a former drugs dealer competed with pursuing cop Kurt Russell for the affections of icily cool restaurateur Michelle Pfeiffer, Mel hurried back for *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989).

This time the drug syndicate is controlled by evil South African Joss Ackland, but Riggs is sufficiently more interested in life to fall for pouting Patsy Kensit as Ackland's shapely assistant:

"When we first met Riggs in *Lethal Weapon*", explains Gibson, "we found him at one of his lowest points. Because of the events of that film, he's gotten over his personal hurdles, and isn't harbouring the same kind of hostilities towards himself. As a result, he's not trying to knock himself off all the time".

Yet director Richard Donner and producer Joel Silver avoided the trap of removing all of Riggs' teeth:

"Guys like Riggs are addicted to the adrenaline in their systems. They've lived a certain way for a long period of time, and they don't like coming down".

with his ex-girlfriend Goldie Hawn before both going on the run. All it proved was that even the Rear of the Year and the Golden Girl were capable of raising a yawn when all the conditions are wrong.

Air America (1990) was even more screwball, and even thinner on laughs as Mel and Robert Downey Jr. played CIA pilots running illegal missions into Laos until they finally got double-crossed. Then Gibson remembered that his best work had drawn on his earlier virtues, and at Franco Zeffirelli's urging agreed to take the title role in *Hamlet* (1992).

Because by this stage most critics had forgotten that Mel trained as a classical stage actor, howls of laughter greeted his decision, only to be turned to acclaim when the movie was released:

"It was a question of whether I'd pick up the challenge or let it go by," he recalled. "To be or not to be... Hamlet, if I can put it that way. And I thought the twentieth century medium of film would make an interesting contrast with the 400 year-old text."

His tortured Prince has a restless power and nervous energy that is truly magnetic, and is arguably his best screen role to date. The return, inevitably, to *Lethal Weapon 3* seems a safe option by contrast, with his £5.8 million fee and the £20 million gross on the opening weekend - the second highest in history.

Arms dealing by a renegade cop is the supposed story, but once more the real interest is Riggs and Murtagh. Danny Glover may continue to lament "I'm too old for this shit", but their easy bantering seems set to run and run.

There may be yet another *Lethal Weapon* movie on the cards next year. In the meantime it looks like he has another major

hit on his hands with *Forever Young*, a romantic thriller in which he plays a test pilot frozen in ice for thirty years and returned to life in a world that is distinctly different. "If ever a film with Mel Gibson in it could be called a sleeper", opined *Variety*, "this is it."

The biggest challenge these days

for mellowed Mel is how to deal with those pesky hordes of adoring females:

"The weird thing is, I can't see what they find so attractive. I find it really embarrassing when women think I'm something special. I'm a romantic who doesn't expect girls to tear their clothes off whenever they meet me".

Just stay mean and moody, Mel, and you'll do fine ...

TEN COPIES OF WARNER'S LETHAL WEAPON 3 TO BE WON

Those who liked *Lethal Weapon 1 & 2* won't be disappointed in the latest adventure featuring sexy Mel Gibson and the grumpy but hunky, Danny Glover. There's enough blood, guts and action in this movie to make Arnold Schwarzenegger look to his pectorals.

In addition to the usual *Lethal Weapon* formula comes the added attraction of one Detective Cole played by Rene Russo, a lady cop who is more than a match for the slightly nutty Gibson. Cole is Rigg's alluring alter-ego: a fast talking, hard-driving, mean-fighting cop with nerves of steel. Have a butchers' at this and watch the sparks fly!

To win a copy of *Lethal Weapon 3* all you have to is tell us the name of the recently filmed Shakespeare play that starred Mel Gibson. Answers on a postcard to: *Lethal Weapon 3* Competition, Video World Magazine, The Northern And Shell Building, PO Box 381, London E14 9TW.



It's perhaps significant that in the interval between making the first *Lethal Weapon* and the third, Mel made three other films, and only one of them scored. *Bird on a Wire* (1990) was a perfunctory comedy-thriller used as a 'star vehicle' for Mel as a fugitive from assassins who teams up

